

Field Report

Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area

■ 1.0 Summary

The Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (NRA), encompasses 48 miles of the Chattahoochee River, south of Lake Lanier and includes 16 land units on the banks of the river (see Figure 1). Located in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, the NRA is more like a regional, urban park, than a national park.

Figure 1. View of Chattahoochee River



Visitor activities include land and water-based recreation such as hiking, walking, running, bicycling, fishing, canoeing, kayaking and rafting. The majority of the park visitors are from the local area and come to the park often for exercise. Over 85 percent of the park visitors are people who have been to the park more than once. As the only undeveloped public land in the area, the park is a very popular place for local and regional residents.

As a result of its popularity, the park experiences extreme parking shortages during peak times. Other park problems include pedestrian/bicycle/vehicular conflicts, lack of diversity in visitors and employees, a shortage of adequate restroom facilities, and pressure to

develop more areas of the park. The park also has an advantage to other national park locations due to the fact that it is able to connect to an already existing transit system.

While the park is in need of a transportation planner to take a serious look at the options the park has to relieve some of the parking and congestion problems, some feasible alternative include, but are not limited to:

- A point-to-point shuttle from the new Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) rail station;
- A loop shuttle from local commercial office building parking lots to several popular park units; and
- Park unit stops on local bus routes. Vehicle should accommodate bicycles.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

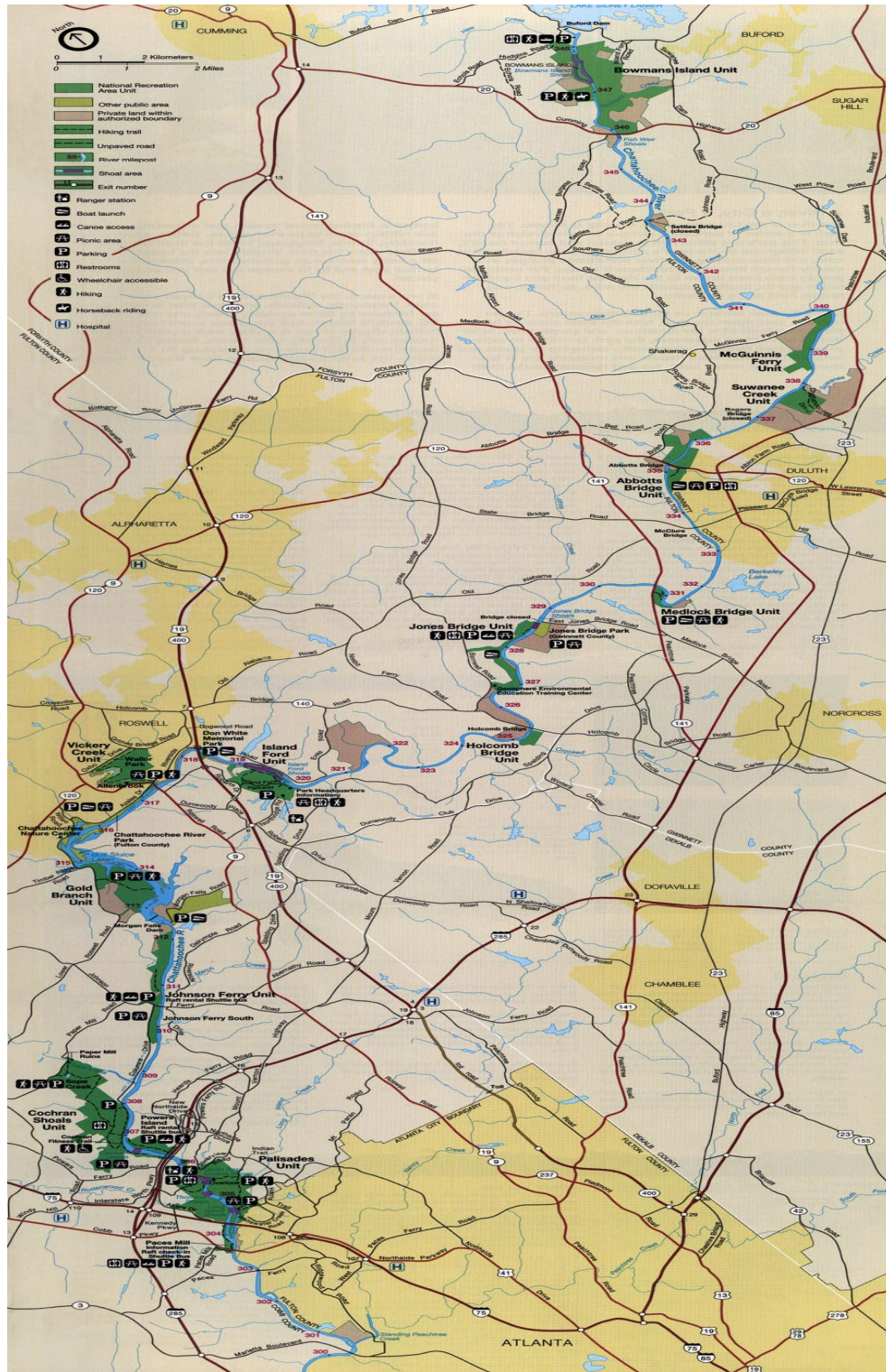
The Chattahoochee River NRA is located in the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area, north of the city limits in Cobb, Dekalb, Fulton, Forsyth, and Gwinnett counties. The Chattahoochee River NRA stretches for 48 miles from Lake Lanier to the Interstate 75/285 junction (see Figure 2).

2.2 Administration and Classification

The history of the Chattahoochee River is one based on the movement of people, rather than the shipment of goods. The river also provided food, water for agriculture and drinking and was a power source for mills and factories. For the most part, the bridges that span the river are historical crossings.

Established in 1978 as a unit of the National Park Service (NPS), the Chattahoochee River NRA is a series of 16 land units, dispersed along the 48-mile stretch of river. The distance between the units, coupled with poor road connections and traffic congestion, makes it impossible for park staff to visit all the park units in a single day. The park headquarters are located near Roswell, Georgia at the Island Ford Unit, near the middle of the recreation area. The park has approximately 40 employees.

Figure 2. Map of Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area



2.3 Physical Description

Also known as the “String of Pearls,” the Chattahoochee NRA centers on a 48-mile stretch of the Chattahoochee River with 16 enclaves of parkland dispersed along the river. The river is located in an area of rolling hills, steep elevation changes and hardwood forest. The park is surrounded by suburban development, and remains one of the few accessible open spaces for the residents of Atlanta. River raft launches are located within a five-minute drive of I-285 and 45 minutes from anywhere in the Atlanta area.

Usually clear and slow moving, the Chattahoochee River provides an area for recreation and is the primary water source for the city of Atlanta (see Figures 3 and 4). In recent years, there has been some concern over pollutants in the river, although most of this occurs south of the city.

Figure 3. High School Student Group Preparing for Canoe Trip



Figure 4. View of Chattahoochee River



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Recreation Area

The mission of the of recreation area is to provide an opportunity for land and water recreation for the people of Atlanta. The mission includes objectives to:

- Maintain the undeveloped, environmental integrity of the land and river;
- Protect the historical value of the cultural resources within the park; and
- Provide an environmental and interpretive educational experience.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Unlike many other national parks, the Chattahoochee River NRA is more a series of urban parks, rather than a vast expanse of land. The annual visitation of the park exceeds 2.9 million people, 85 percent of which are repeat visitors. Most visitors are from the local or regional area and spend one to three hours at one unit of the park. The park is a very popular place for a short visit from local residents for exercise activities such as walking, hiking, or running. Other popular land-based activities include wildlife viewing and picnicking. The park actively provides interpretive nature programs for visitors including guided walks, summer “Frog Frolicks” (visitors can wade into the wetlands) and “Owl Prowls” in the autumn evenings.

Approximately 75 percent of the visitors use the land-based resources, while the rest use the river resources. River-based recreation includes canoeing, kayaking and fishing. The most popular river-based recreation is rafting or floating. Visitors can rent or bring their own rafts to float down the river for a few hours. The Chattahoochee Outdoor Center, the authorized the NPS concessionaire, provides two locations along the river to begin a river raft trip and transports rafters back to their cars after the trip with a shuttle system. Trips begin either at the Johnson Ferry unit or at Powers Island and end at either Powers Island or Paces Mill and last two to five hours, depending on start and end points. A few off site outfitters also rent rafting equipment, but do not provide transportation to the park.

Peak seasons in the park vary by activity. Land-based activity peak seasons are spring and fall, while river-based activity peak season is the summer. Visitation is concentrated in the southern park units, where more facilities are available. Southern units, such as Cochran Shoals with an annual visitation of nearly 1.5 million people, could be considered parks in their own right (see Figure 5). The northern facilities of the park are less developed and have fewer visitors, although population and development is increasing in the areas adjacent to the park’s northern facilities.

Park visitors are able to access the park from numerous apartment complexes and neighborhoods that surround the park or by car. A small percentage of the visitors come with group tours to use the river concession. The park charges a \$2.00 daily parking fee. Visitors may purchase an annual pass for \$20. There is no charge for pedestrians.

Figure 5. Cochran Shoals Trail



The park is beyond its capacity in terms of parking availability, insufficient number of restrooms, and available staff time. The popularity of the park units are such that the park is being “loved to death.”

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Chattahoochee River NRA is inextricably linked with the Atlanta metropolitan area and is affected by the plans, policies and developments of the suburban areas around the park.

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Visitors to the Chattahoochee River NRA come to the park by car or on foot to the park. There is no mass transit service to the park. The majority of parking problems in the park occur in the southern units, which are closer to dense suburban developments and have more public facilities. The parking problems at the Chattahoochee River NRA are so extensive that park units with facilities frequently experience a parking shortage. Parking shortages, while less frequent, are also a problem in the north units of the park where there are fewer facilities.

An example of the overcrowded parking conditions at the Chattahoochee River NRA is the popular Cochran Shoals unit. This park unit provides designated paths, including a three-mile loop trail, that are used for hiking, walking, and running. Although the average length of stay at the park produces a high turnover rate for parked cars, visitors infrequently find an open space among the approximately 150 spaces available. Park users will either wait (often up to 30 minutes) for a space in the parking lot, or they will park on park entrance roads or illegally on state roads and walk into the park. The state does not

monitor for these parking violations. Parking problems similar to the experience at Cochran Shoals are prevalent at the Palisades, Johnson Ferry, Gold Branch, Vickery Creek and Island Ford units and are increasing at Jones Bridge unit.

As a result of crowded and illegal parking, pedestrian and vehicular conflicts are frequent, both on park property and on the roads outside the park. Crowded conditions within the park also exacerbate pedestrian and bicycle conflicts.

Transportation between units is available only through the Chattahoochee Outdoor Center and is focused on river users. A limited shuttle service picks up rafters at the end of their trip and transports them back to their cars. Approximately two-thirds of rafters begin at Johnson Ferry and one-third begin at Powers Island. In the 1980s, at the height of the rafting concession business, the concessionaire would run three vans from nearby commercial office building lots (rented for the weekends) to the raft rental location.

Atlanta is famous for wide, extensive roadways, long commutes, and substantial air quality problems. The unmet demand and congestion in Atlanta creates a situation where transportation infrastructure is overcrowded the day it is opened. A number of roads that serve the southern units of the park, such as Georgia State Road 400, are severely congested during peak travel hours. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Atlanta is non-compliant with regard to air quality standards due to heavy automobile usage. Georgia Governor Barnes recently began a new task force to look at local transportation problems. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) was born out of a consensus that part of the solution is regional transit. The Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority (MARTA), has developed a network of rail and bus systems, which operate close to the park. In fall 1999, MARTA began the construction of a new rail station close to the park, between exit 5 and 6 on Georgia State Road 400. MARTA has plans to continue the rail extension north on SR 400 to Winword Parkway through Forsyth County.

Other local counties, such as Cobb County, have their own special taxing district and transit systems. Though less extensive than the MARTA system, the Cobb County system does have its own programs to expand and connect with the MARTA system.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The park is generally seen as an asset to the community. Surveys done by the park indicate that the park users are aware of the value of open space in an urban setting. Local communities and citizens activist groups are in the process of purchasing land for a multi-county, multi-use greenway that would connect to the Chattahoochee River and the NRA land units. Communities (such as Roswell, Georgia) and groups (such as the PATH Foundation) make the preservation of land and promotion of nature-based activities a local and regional priority.

The park's 96+ miles of riverbank, which border suburban development, make it difficult to monitor and control the encroachment of local property owners. The park frequently finds residential property owners who have cleared parts of the park adjacent to their yards.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Most of the parking lots at the recreation area are unpaved and do not have well marked ingress and egress or formal parking spaces. The loose pattern of the parking makes the capacity of the lot difficult to determine, but also allows parking at the edges of the lot, which creates resource damage.

The area around the park has a combined sewer system that accepts storm drainage and sewage. Sewer outlets on the park property have, on occasion, overflowed dumping raw sewage into the river. The park is reluctant to pave their current lots due to the increasing run-off into the river. The park will also avoid, at all costs, providing additional parking that would diminish the size of the land preserve.

The park is also under pressure to develop more areas of the park, especially northern land units.

Although not technically open to the public, the park does have a variety of historic sites on park property. The historic buildings and sites in the park include mill ruins from the 1840s, a 1930s lodge built by an Atlanta lawyer (now used for the administrative activities of the park), and two farmsteads still in private use.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The recreation opportunities at the park are limited to local visitors or regional visitors with the means to get to the park. The lack of transportation alternatives to the park limits the types of people the park can serve. The park staff is aware that they are serving an economically advantaged suburban area of Atlanta, and that they do not serve a large segment of the regional population.

To serve a more diverse population, the park must be able to upgrade their facilities and provide a quality experience able to accommodate a greater visitation level.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit and Regional Plans

In October 1999, the park began an official update to its General Management Plan (GMP). The GMP is scheduled to be complete in 2003. The park is also updating its Water Resources Management Plan (2000), Historical Resources Plan (2000), and Concession Services Plan.

Regional plans, recently made public by the by the Atlanta Regional Commission, include Regional Transportation Plan for 2025 with goals to meet air quality standards and mobility targets in the Metro Atlanta area and the five-year Activity Center/Town Center

Investment Policy Study (ACTIPS) with goals to use transportation investments to improve accessibility and connectivity in the region's activity and town centers.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The park is very active with the local community and offers a number of opportunities for residents to participate in park programs. The park works with urban at-risk youth to provide a nature experience. Park naturalists also make presentations at other local community facilities such as local schools, City of Roswell Chattahoochee River Park and the Chattahoochee Nature Center.

■ **5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options**

The options for Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) for the Chattahoochee River NRA should be coordinated with, and supplemented by, local and regional transportation solutions.

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The need for solutions to the parking and congestion problems of the recreation area is to the point of desperation. The quality of the visitor experience suffers to the point of extreme when visitors are inundated with the congestion problems they face every day in a place where they should be able to escape and relax. There is a latent demand for access to the park facilities that is limited by the parking available.

If other mobility choices were available for visitors to come to certain units of the park, the park must be able to complement the service with increased recreation and restroom facilities, and state and local authorities would need to enforce parking laws on road shoulders. However, the lack of adequate parking also creates a natural limit to the number of people that can come, or who are willing to come, to the park. By the same token, the diversity of the visitors and employees are limited by the lack of alternative transportation.

5.2 Feasible Transit Alternatives

The alternatives for transportation must be in context with the suburban environment surrounding the park, and must serve park goals such as increasing service to a diverse population or reducing run-off sources such as eroded road shoulders near the river. Three feasible alternatives include, but are not limited to:

- A point-to-point shuttle from the new MARTA rail station. The shuttle could be run by the park as an on-demand service from rail station or as a regular route during peak weekends. Shuttle vehicle should accommodate bicycles.
- A weekday and/or weekend loop shuttle from local commercial office building parking lots to several popular park units. Shuttle vehicle should accommodate bicycles.
- Park unit stops on local bus routes. Vehicle should accommodate bicycles.

With the choices available, the park must also convince visitors that transit is the best way to get to the park, even if their trip is for a short duration. Also, parking laws must be enforced for transit to become a viable transportation option. Clearly, the transportation problems of the park are indicative of the problems of the greater Atlanta region and all solutions should consider this context.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

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■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

William Carroll, Chattahoochee River NRA, Assistant Superintendent

Ken Gibbons, Chattahoochee Outdoor Center

Jerry Hightower, Chattahoochee River NRA, Park Naturalist/Environmental Education Coordinator

Suzanne Lewis, Chattahoochee River NRA, Superintendent